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ABSTRACT

This study assesses correlates of the use and non-use of illicit drugs and medicinal substances among 6,405 secondary school students in an entire district. Responses to a questionnaire administered to the students were analyzed separately by sex and grade level (7-9 vs. 10-12). Some findings were: (1) about one-third of the high school students (10-12) were using illicit drugs, while one-tenth of junior high school students (7-9) were users; (2) over two-thirds of the grade 7-9 group and over half the grade 10-12 group reported no drug usage at all; and (3) legal substances were most frequently used by those reporting usage, with coffee, alcohol and tobacco most popular and illicit drugs (except marijuana) used by less than one-tenth of the sample. Friends were very important in shaping drug-use patterns, with users being eight times as likely to have a best firend also using drugs. Users describe themselves as social misfits and may turn to drugs as a means of finding friends. The data suggest that, at least for this district, the majority of adolescents are relatively uninvolved with illicit drugs. Educational programs must differentiate between the relatively small user group, those sporadically involved, and those who are non-users. (Author/CJ)

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DRUG USE IN ADOLESCENTS: FINDINGS FROM A DISTRICT-WIDE CENSUS OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL AND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NEW YORK STATE

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Studies of drug use patterns of college students have suggested that a sizable proportion of respondents began experimenting with drugs prior to entering college. However, relatively little is known of the drug use patterns of students in younger age groups, many of whom do not go on to college. The present study was designed to assess correlates of the use and non-use of illicit drugs, and medicinal substances among Junior High School and High School students. Because data were obtained from virtually the entire school-age population in a single district, they are particularly significant.

Rather than focus upon incidence per se, the study was aimed chiefly at delineating differences in such aspects as family background, school achievement, friendship patterns, personality traits and attitudes of durg-users and non-users. Contrasts were made of reported use of alcohol, tobacco, and a wide variety of medicinal substances, as well as illicit drugs, with the ultimate aim that of developing more effective educational programs.

The subjects were 6,405 students attending the two High Schools and three Junior High Schools in a Rockland County school district. They represent 89% of the enrollment in grades seven through twelve.

A questionnaire was administered in classrooms to all students present on October 19, 1971. Safeguards were taken to ensure maximum cooperation and guarantee anonymity; 96.4% of those present returned usable questionnaires.

Data were analyzed separately by sex and grade level. (7-9 vs. 10-12). Students were also divided into three groups

1. Non-users: students who reported never having used any of the substances listed.

2. Users of medicinal substances:

a. Analgesics only.

b. Tranquilizers and/or amphetamines, barbiturates, and anti-depressants.

3. Users of illicit drugs: students reporting the use, at least once, of marijuana, LSD, other hallucinogens, cocaine, heroin, or methadone. This group was further subdivided into:

a. Past users: the majority had been occasional, rather than seriously involved, drug users.

b. Current users: users of at least one illict drug at the time of the survey. If only one illicit drug was used, it was nearly always marijuana.

It was found that approximately one-third of the high school students used some sort of illicit drug at the time of the survey, while one-tenth of the junior high school students were current drug users. The percentage of current and past illicit drug users increased grade by grade.

However, the same set of figures show that more than two-thirds of the junior high school students and over one-half of the high school students reported never having used any of the drug listed, either legal or illicit.

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Insert table 1 about here
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The present sample shows similar rates of use for males and females in the same grades, with younger females somewhat more likely to be involved than their classmates. One likely explanation would seem to be girls' propensity to date older boys.

Greater numbers of females reported using tranquilizers, amphetamines, barbiturates and anti-depressants, at high school level, though there were no sex differences for the younger students. For both age groups, females were more likely to fall into the

"analgesics only" group, as is characteristic of college samples.

When the reported frequency of use of various substances was examined, the legal substances were by far the most frequently used, with coffee, alcohol and tobacco most popular. These were followed by marijuana for males; by aspirin, analgesics and marijuana for females. LSD and the remaining illicit substances were used by less than one-tenth of the sample, predominantly by high school males.

Table 2 shows the drug-use patterns of current male high school drug users. Marijuana, the drug of choice for this group, was reported used by a greater number than even coffee or tobacco. It is the only illicit drug used weekly or more by a substantial number of respondents. The majority, however, used it moderatly or infrequently.

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Insert table 2 about here
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Boys in this group drank more alcohol than did male non-drug users (31% reported drinking 6+ drinks weekly, vs. 3% of the non-users.) This seems to counter the popular assumption that marijuana is used instead of alcohol.

Most of the students reported becoming involved with illicit drugs primarily at friends' urgings. Physicians were mentioned as recommending analgesics, tranquilizers and aspirin. In the tranquilizer group, psychotropic agents were prescribed by physicians rather than by friends.

Other data reinforced the impression that friends were critical in importance in shaping drug-use patterns. Students in the current drug use group were 8 times as likely as non-users to have a best friend who was also involved in the use of illicit drugs, and 7 times less likely to have a non-drug-using best friend. Drug-users were also more likely to report having siblings who use illicit drugs, and parents who smoke, drink, or use psychotropic drugs excessively.

Personality traits, as assessed by an adjective checklist, showed that current drug users were significantly more likely than non-users to describe themselves as usually rebellious, worthless, disgusted, hopeless, cynical, sad, anxious, helpless, impulsive, and stubborn, and never ethical or happy. Users of psychotropic agents saw themselves as usually isolated and lonely significantly more often than others.

Current drug users were four times more likely than non-users to have been in psychotherapy and to have experienced parental divorce or death. They were less involved in school activities, sports, and studying, with drug-use their major social outlet.

The present data suggest that, at least in this district, the majority of adolescents are relatively free of serious involvement with illicit drugs. While marijuana is popular, along with alcohol and tobacco, other illicit drugs are rarely used. From this standpoint, educational programs will have to better differentiate between the relatively small group seriously involved in drug abuse, the larger group of regular and sporadic users of marijuana, and the non-users.

The loneliness of the users of medicinal agents suggests they have a high probability of becoming involved with illicit drugs, if only as a means of finding friends. Prescribing tranquilizers and anti-depressants may well be the least constructive way to help them cope with their social isolation.

The non-users have their own values and goals, and seem to be living in a different self-selected environment, albeit in the same schools and community. The existence of a large group of non-users should be emphasized, since the media's disproportinate attention to drug users and abusers may spuriously increase apparent peer pressures.

Table 1. Description of the Sample

	Non Users		Users of Legal Drugs				Users of Illicit Drugs			
			Analg. only		Tranq. et.al.		Past		Current	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS										
Males	1256	70.3	207	11.5	106	5.9	27	1.5	190	10.6
Females	1206	67.8	253	14.2	96	5.4	18	1.0	204	11.4
Sex Unknown	53	69.7	6	7.8	5	6.5	2	2.6	10	13.1
Total	2515	69.1	466	12.8	207	5.6	47	1.2	404	11.1
SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS										
Males	646	47.6	130	9.5	52	3.8	68	5.0	461	33.9
Females	556	41.0	183	13.5	94	6.9	53	3.9	467	34.5
Sex Unknown	28	50.0	7	12.5	2	3.5	2	3.5	17	30.3
Total	1230	44.4	320	11.5	148	5.3	123	4.4	945	34.1

Note: except for the percentages in the "Total" columns, the percentages in each category are computed within the designated group. For example, the percentage of senior high school males currently using illicit drugs (33.9%) is derived by computing the number of males taking drugs (461), in terms of the total number of senior high school males who handed in questionnaires (1357).

Table 2. Extent of Use of Drugs and Other Substances, by sex, grade level, and drug use group.

High School Males, Current Users of Illicit Drugs (N = 461)

Substance	Ever Used		Now Using		Mainly Used
	N	%	N	%	
Coffee	413	89.5	401	86.9	daily
Alcohol	433	93.9	414	89.8	weekly
Tobacco	344	74.6	291	63.1	daily
Aspirin	380	82.4	343	74.4	monthly
Rx analgesics	181	39.2	161	34.9	monthly
Compoz	116	25.1	105	22.7	monthly
Tranquilizers	106	22.9	98	21.2	monthly
Amphetamines	181	39.2	158	34.2	once
Barbiturates	153	33.1	135	29.2	monthly
Antidepressants	40	8.6	40	8.6	monthly
Marijuana	433	96.0	443	96.0	weekly
LSD	141	30.5	123	26.6	monthly*
Other hallucinogens	132	28.6	126	27.3	monthly*
Cocaine	87	18.8	87	18.8	monthly*
Heroin	106	22.9	102	22.1	once
Methadone	27	5.8	27	5.8	daily

Note: "Mainly used" refers to modal response
* indicates that second most frequent response was "once".